

New England Summers

BY NANCY McCAFFERTY

When we were children and living in Ohio, the capstone of the summer was vacationing at the little cottage (in New England on the South Shore of Massachusetts). We awaited the time with unbounded anticipation and excitement. That is not to say that summer in the lush green hills and valleys of Ohio was lacking. But the ocean was an undeniable drawing force -- its secrets, its power, the briskly chill waves crashing over small bodies, and the lingering sway of its motion as we fell asleep at night. Conversely, there were the fearful aspects of being pulled under the bitter water, unable to rise from its unrelenting grasp, an imagined or real step on a horseshoe crab so that everything your foot felt and your eyes couldn't see was a dangerous encounter with an unknown from the depths.

One year it rained the entire time we stayed. We walked along the beach and felt the exhilarating sting of the fine spray on our face. That vast loneliness with its constant rhythm permitted only hints of its savage might. As we stared out at the overcast sky and the unending gray water, our dad awakened in us an awe of the ocean's mystery, and strength, which no mere man could ever understand or conquer. He unlocked the truth of the ancient voyages -- of the brute courage and terrible sufferings those early travelers endured. He said, "Look at the faces. Determination!" Deeply lined foreheads and leather-like skin of fishermen jolt us even years afterward into a remembrance of what he had told us. An inlet or a bay was not enough. There could be nothing between us and Europe except the undiscovered world which lived beneath the sea's surface. Dad was a purist at heart.

The cottage was set on a small hill surrounded by trees and masses of sky blue cornflowers. The nearest house couldn't be seen and we turned to one another for companionship. In one particular grove of trees, we viewed the world through our children's eyes, imagining that no stranger's stare could penetrate the shadows. In that hushed setting, we were invisible. No one could intrude on our fantasy or spoil the fresh scent of the pines. It was a private space -- so quiet that we could lean against a tree and listen to nature's work-a-day symphony.

Mornings before breakfast we ran barefoot up the hill to pick the wild raspberries and blackberries growing in clumped confusion. Amid the shouting and laughing, one of us always managed to fall prey to the hidden thorns lurking there, but to wear shoes was unthinkable. The berries were cleaned, destemmed, and scattered on cereal or pancakes. Then we were off to the beach. Softly rolling dunes gave pause to the glint of the sun on the water and the wind whipped the spiked sea grass against our legs.

The coarse sand burned our unprotected feet, but we knew that leaping in the foam from the shored waves was a cooling remedy. Dad would line up the 6 of us children and announce that we were going for a "brisk plunge." We stood for a moment, hand in hand, then raced to the water and dove through an incoming wave. The cold water was always a shock, an immediate lift. We felt alive and completely free and full of energy. After swimming awhile, we wandered along the shore with whichever child wanted to come.

Once we found a dead fish that had been washed up and since it was a decent size, we claimed it as our own and brought it back to show our parents, each child boasting that he had been the one brave enough to pick it up. We brought the trophy home, wrapped it in foil, and kept it until the odor was too much to bear. Sometimes, when the sun drained us of activity, we sat in the sand and played the usual castle building games. Then the tide would come in and the fortresses became memories.

On do-nothing days we hiked to the library, which graciously allowed visitors book check-out privileges. Inside the old stone structure was a spiral staircase ascending to cubicles housing wooden shelves lined with books. The library was small, full of twists and turns, with high curtainless windows and wooden tables and chairs. It was an ideal place to charm the imagination of a child. Who knew where the secret passages and the tiny dim rooms might lead?

At night the logs burned in the fireplace and the aroma of sweet pine filled the cottage. Conversation warmed like the glow of the fire and we learned the history of the fight for independence in Massachusetts. No longer would a stone fence be simply that. Now it was the defense from behind which the Minute Men had assaulted the British in that long ago April. We stood where John Adams has stood. We explored the streets of Paul Revere and John Hancock. We followed the path of the rebels in Indian disguise. While others read about it in textbooks, we had seen it. It was alive.

Bedtime came. We had the pleasure of having bunk beds and a daily argument usually determined who slept in the top bunk. As we lay there, peering out the window at miles of trees and stars, the light from the distant water tower blinked a repetition of what each of us sensed. You are safe. You are secure. You are loved.

Time passes and things change. Two brothers and a sister are living in Ohio; one brother is in New York, and another sister lives in Washington, D.C. I have children of my own. The property around our cottage has been sold and subdivided into tiny plots with tiny houses. My children, who have lived on the shores of both oceans, cannot be mesmerized, as we were, by its glimmering beauty on a clear blue day. How can they know what it is like? And yet, some things never change.

All of us still have an unebbing feeling for this place. My father and mother return as they have for 41 years. We speak of plans to rent a house where we can gather once more for a summer. We understand that it can never be truthfully the way it was. But there is that tug, the undeniable drawing force of the ocean pulling us back to itself. I wonder if our parents realize the magnificent gift they entrusted to us in those sunny seasons.

Perhaps they do, and that is enough.